Rory Hughes

The Grind

The *grind* was a thing that sounded like what it meant; not onomatopoeic, but the inflections of the word itself had a sort of downwards parabolic trajectory; crescendo, peak, diminuendo: *grr-iiIIIii-nd*.

grr: the hypnopompic groan with which Tony replied to his phone alarm six days a week: a piercing monophonic motif that would repeat itself in odd time signatures—Tony thought that it must have been deliberate, something in 4/4 would be too relaxing; this was cleverly composed to be as jarring and irritating as possible such that actually waking up seemed a better alternative than snoozing and having to listen to it again. Tony remembered when he was sixteen, on his old flip phone, he had set Jimi Hendrix's 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' as his alarm. A song he loved; or rather one he loved until the vocals came in. That percussive wah-pedal dead chord intro before the opening riff; of course, he eventually, unintentionally, conditioned himself to hate the song altogether. Two decades later, and he still associated that intro with something bad; order, routine, the necessity to be in accordance with how others are; sometimes the song would come up on shuffle and he'd feel a tiny wave of panic.

Why was it called the grind? He didn't know. Tony resented all the people who worked remotely; even worse, the people who referred to work and other such things as *adulting*. He was fascinated by words, but he hated them. He didn't necessarily hate the fact that it was a childish verbalisation of a noun, he just hated that it was another word. He expressed this to someone at work and they told him he must be "one of those Jordan Peterson" types. When he got home he researched the name and instantly resented this colleague. He was nothing like him. This person hated things to do with gender and sex and semantics. Tony was remotely aware of the changes around him, but this was nothing to do with him. He just truly hated words.

Tony remembered when you could set your ringtone to a song you liked. It seemed like it was still possible but very complicated, so no-one bothered and just settled for the default jingles your Android or iPhone had.

iiIIIii: that central inflection of the *grind*, the seemingly endless peak of the parabola: the workday itself, the droning endless monotony; when Tony spoke he only did so with his mouth, which may sound like a no-fucking-shit kind of statement, but with Tony, eyes and nose unmoving, body still, hands by his side, it was like he wanted no other part of his body to suffer the indecency of being a part of the act of speech. *iiIIIii*. It was like tinnitus, all throughout the workday. A logophobe, Tony was of course also a hater of those things that constitute words, and vowels were the worst. Consonants, most could not successfully be conjoined to make for long sounds. For example, *ccccc* wouldn't last long; *gggggg*: maybe something like an infant gurgling, a disgusting sound. Some were despicable: *mmmm*, for example, a declaration of pleasure, from maybe food or something sexual; *sssss*: again, too sexual, sibilance they called it, of course there would be a word for it. But vowels, these things were, in the sense of speech, indefinite; they were screams, cries, like the *iiIIIii*s of the workday, agonising sounds that could last for hours.

Tony worked as a back-end developer. He'd worked in tech ever since leaving university with a 2:1 in Computer Science. This was a job Tony could handle. He had carefully nurtured his personality around the office as someone to only talk to if completely necessary. The written word was nowhere near as repulsive to Tony as was the spoken word. Thoughts do not manifest as something written but as something spoken, no matter how nebulously. Looking at the code on the screen could even be relaxing sometimes. Programming languages were languages that instructed some function or design in the briefest and most economical way. Code could not be read like one might read a book. It's not all nonsensical, there are words you can understand, but for a non-programmer, reading through code would paint no picture. In a way, Tony relished this bastardization of meaning; and loved all the curly brackets, commas and semicolons. These were things that made no sound. *[{} , ; [, , ,] ! " " !] {}*. Sometimes he imagined a place where creatures only communicated through symbols; an impossible scenario which fell into complete abstraction if given too much thought. One time he imagined the vocalisation of punctuation and symbols as a sort of heating or throbbing of the brain that the other creatures could detect.

Five years ago, when Tony was still under the desperate impression that he could function within society and perhaps even have a partner, his mother set up a date for him. A niece of his mother's school friend who was also, how had his mother put it, "a bit odd; not odd—shy!" Tony firmly believed the date had gone horribly. They went to a Zizzi. He was so anxious he was hardly able to eat in front of her. The act of eating was something he considered one should only do in private, like shitting or masturbating. Basic, pathetic human needs. Anything that was a biological necessity was something to be ashamed of, and to be done alone. He found his date ugly and boring, not that she was unattractive or uninteresting, he just found her ugly and boring in the same way he found everyone ugly and boring, in the same way he found himself ugly and boring; in a similar but much milder way than how he found language repulsive and redundant.

Programming languages were closer to architecture than language. Tony enjoyed reading files written in frontend or backend languages he was not fluent in. He was most proficient in Python, and to him now, it had almost become as repugnant as the written word. Every instruction or algorithm held such semantic value because he was so adept with the language. He could imagine the database, visualise it, see the strings of data anthropomorphise into a user experience. *User*: a word, but one he at least thought was apt: users of self, users of others, of oxygen, supplies, users of language and love and hatred and all of the human ailments that we ascribe such meagre words to.

The date had ended with an awkward handshake; she had laughed, embarrassed, and he disliked the noise of that. He woke up the next morning and saw that she had texted him: *Sorry I wasnt quite myself last night. I had a nice time though. Hopefully we can do it again soon xxxxx*

The lack of the apostrophe in *wasn't* was both infuriating and invigorating but what drove him mad were those five *x*s next to each other. He put on his glasses and stared at the string of them and his brain, with an unusual relentlessness, tried to vocalise them; he saw hateful insignias; algebraic nonsense; Czech hedgehogs along the bloodied beaches of Normandy. He put his phone down on the bedside table and went to the bathroom. He removed his glasses again, washed his face with cold water, brushed his teeth, flossed, and for a while, stared in the mirror. He could hear it now.

"*KKKKKKKCCCCHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH.*"

There was saliva on the mirror. He was breathing heavily. There was spittle on his lips and chin. But that is how it would sound, those *x*s. It was the sound of radio feedback; a scared cat; a train riding off the tracks; tumbling concrete and metal as a building was being demolished; the sound you made as a kid after saying *over* into a walkie-talkie; deafening coastal winds.

nd: this is where the word was at its least onomatopoeic; it was just that it sounded like, and was one letter short of the word, *end*. The end of the working day. Sometimes he imagined it as *nduh*, the *uh* being a sort of final sigh: the noise he'd make as he pushed through the revolving door and walked towards the bus stop, knowing that every time this happened was an iteration, a flipbook with an image that never changed.

Tony rarely drank, but he did the day before he disappeared. He drank two bottles of wine and came the closest he ever had to coming to terms with his hatred for words. Words could describe him; they constituted his every thought; if he knew no words he could not think. Words could be used by others to describe him, whether thought or spoken or written. That night, he took a vow of mental silence and with that, ceased self-awareness. Of course, never before had so many words—thought, spoken, written, printed and published—ever been uttered about Tony. *Tony Sawyer, 34, disappeared on the night of April 5, 2023*, read the paper. *If anyone knows anything about my dear son, please come forward*, pleaded his mother on national television. *It was that quiet guy, the creepy one*, said the receptionist to one of the interns at Tony's former office. Not that he was to know about any of that; never would, never did.